HISTORIANS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEE

A Lee scholar describes the current state of Lee historiography.

By Alan T. Nolan

In 1991, THE UNIVERSITY OF North Carolina Press published my book *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History.*[1] I was prompted to write the book by what I perceived as a conflict between the commonly asserted views of General Robert E. Lee—what I called the Lee tradition—and the facts of his life and career. I used "considered" in the title because it seemed that with very few exceptions Lee had not been considered by his biographers. Instead, they had simply reiterated a series of heroic statements about the general without having researched the relevant facts of his life or adverting to the possibility of an alternative view.

In the book I identified six almost uniformly asserted characteristics attributed to Lee that I concluded did not hold up under factual scrutiny. Specifically, I examined the historicity of the assertions of the Lee canon that (1) he was anti-slavery; (2) his siding with the South took place with complete propriety; (3) his generalship was flawless; (4) he was magnanimous toward the North during the war; (5) his dogged pursuit of the war after he believed it was lost was glorious and admirable; and (6) he was a conciliator between former foes after the war.

In regard to the slavery issue, I pointed out that Lee owned slaves, trafficked in slaves, and expressly embraced the protection of slavery as a war aim of the Confederacy. Further, I noted his letter to Andrew Hunter dated January 11, 1865, in which he said that he believed "the relation of master and slave...was the best that can exist between the white and black races...in this country."[2] In reference to his generalship,

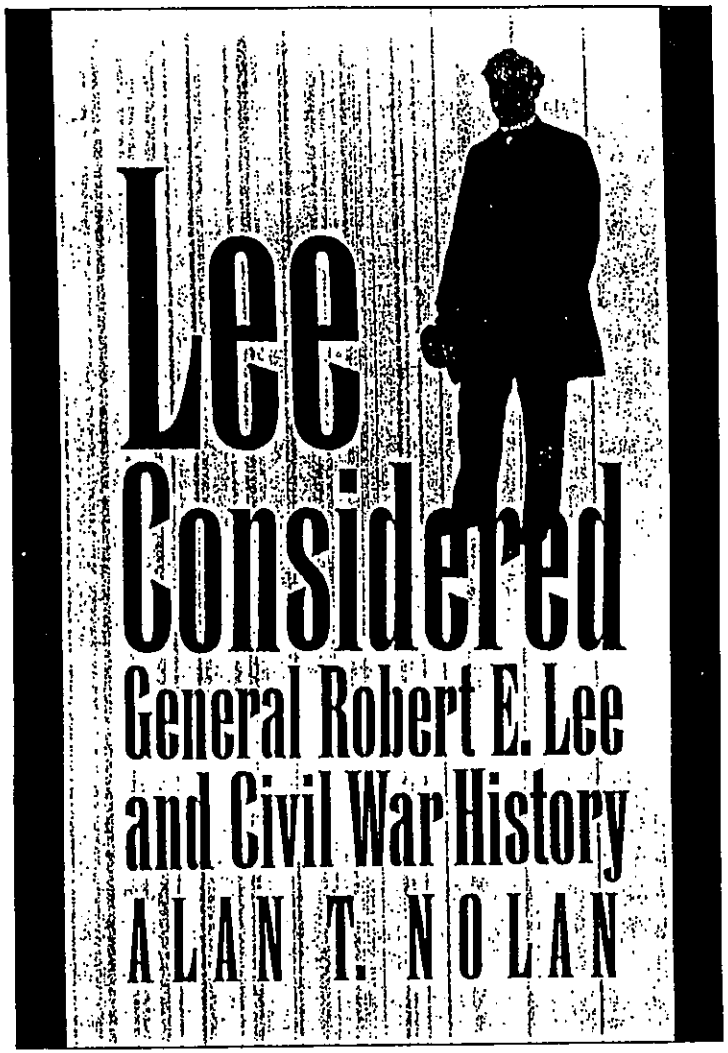
I acknowledged the criticisms of Lee by the twentieth-century English general and military historian J.F.C. Fuller and by the nineteenth-century American Colonel George A. Bruce. I quoted with approval Fuller's comment that Lee "rushed forth to find a battlefield to challenge a contest between himself and the North."[3] I contended that Lee's penchant for offensive warfare caused disproportionate and irreplaceable casualties for his outnumbered army and that this ultimately led to his being trapped in a siege at Petersburg that even he had predicted would be fatal.

Lee's own statements provided the majority of the evidence I used to examine the six issues mentioned above. I, of course, paid my respects to Thomas Connelly's *The Marble Man* as a book that had given me the courage to undertake my inquiry.[4] Acknowledging this debt, I insisted that my effort was nevertheless quite different from Connelly's. *The Marble Man* is an intellectual history of the apotheosis of Lee and traces his development into a heroic figure. Connelly provides a psychohistory of Lee, an explanation of the man in terms of his life experiences. I was concerned, on the other hand, with the merits—the truth or falsity—of the major elements of the Lee tradition.

I write now to examine Lee scholarship since the publication of *Lee Considered*. I believe that during the 1990s a change has occurred regarding how historians look at Lee. Writers no longer simply reiterate the canons of the Lee tradition; instead they question and frequently reject perceived truths.

This new treatment of Lee is evident in nine books published since 1991: *Robert E. Lee: A Biography*, by Emory M. Thomas; *Uncertain Glory: Lee's Generalship Reexamined*, by John D. Mackenzie; *Davis and Lee at War*, by Steven E. Woodworth; *Lee Moves North*, by Michael A. Palmer; *The Warrior Generals*, by Thomas B. Buell; *Lee the Soldier*, edited by Gary W. Gallagher; *The Confederate War*, by Gary W. Gallagher; *How Robert E. Lee Lost The Civil War*, by Edward H. Bonekemper III; and *Robert E. Lee's Civil War*, by Bevin Alexander.

Among the authors I have listed above, Emory Thomas in particular condemned my book at length in his preface and again in his bibliography. Curiously, despite his criticism, he does not disagree with my conclusions regarding any of the six characteristics of the general. With respect to slavery, Thomas states that "Lee's views on slavery



assertion on a letter Lee wrote to his wife in 1856. I also quoted this communication in which Lee expressed negative feelings about slavery while still stating that the institution was necessary.[5]

Thomas acknowledges that Lee owned slaves and was highly critical of those who were intolerant of what he called the "spiritual liberty" of the slave owners. Thomas also noted that Lee trafficked in slaves and cited an 1858 letter in which the general wrote of an incident in which three of his slaves had rebelled against his authority and claimed to be free. Lee recounted his success in "capturing them, tying

Thomas assured readers, physical repression was merely a form of punishment within the slave system, and "Lee likely lacked the stomach to resort to torture." According to Thomas, "Lee dealt with assertive slaves by not dealing with them; he got rid of them, rented them elsewhere." Thomas did not cite Lee's letter to Andrew Hunter about slavery, but, like me, he seems to have discovered that Lee was not opposed to slavery in any meaningful sense.[6]

On the subject of Lee's generalship, Thomas also appears to agree with my findings. He remarks in his book that Lee had become enamored with offensive operations during the Mexican War and came to consider such strategy universally valid. Thomas contends that this was a "precept that [Lee] would have been wise to forget." Lee and his officers, continues Thomas, failed to realize that the conditions that prevailed in Mexico—"the poor state of Santa Anna's army and the use of muskets as the primary infantry weapons"—did not replicate themselves on the battlefields of the Civil War.[7]

On the question of strategy, Thomas notes that Confederate President Jefferson Davis had hoped to win the war "by not losing and outlasting his enemies' commitment to conquest." Although Thomas clearly states that "Lee never openly disputed Davis' version of victory," he does admit that the general "attempted to bend the President, to secure the authority and resources to win the war a different way"—by offensive strategy. Thomas also concludes that Lee's conduct of the Maryland and Gettysburg campaigns was flawed. At Antietam, says Thomas, Lee "should not have offered battle...he very nearly lost his army and the war."[8]

With respect to Lee's postwar attitudes, Thomas and I both discuss his bitterness toward the Union and his participation in the White Sulphur Letter. Written at the White Sulphur Springs resort and printed in newspapers across the country, the letter was a failed effort to ensure that Democrat Horatio Seymour triumphed over Republican Ulysses S. Grant in the 1868 presidential election by reassuring Northern voters of the South's loyalty to the union. In that letter, Lee dissembled as to his own and Southerners' mixed feelings about the freedmen. Elsewhere in his narrative, Thomas—an unabashed admirer of Lee biographer Douglas Southall Freeman, the Lost Cause's most distinguished spokesman—accepts Lee lore of highly questionable authenticity, including the unlikely story of Lee going to the communion rail

Thomas also provides us with an interesting analysis of Lee's candor: "To understand Robert E. Lee it was often important to look beyond his words and watch what he did rather than listen to or read what he said. Lee's actions often modified his words and sometimes the deeds contradicted the words." To Jefferson Davis, he often understated enormously the goals of his projected campaigns. For example, while Davis assumed that Lee invaded Pennsylvania to draw an enemy army out of Virginia, "Lee risked his army and his country in search of a decisive battle to win the war."[10]

In my study, I had been puzzled by these characteristics, which suggest a lack of honesty. I concluded that Lee had a gift for self-delusion, which sometimes involved beguiling others. Thomas apparently had the same reaction. It seems Thomas and I agreed about those issues that our books commonly addressed: Lee and slavery, his generalship, and his postwar attitude toward reconciliation with the North.

In *Uncertain Glory*, John Mackenzie presents a thoughtful review of Confederate and Federal military affairs and pays close attention to Lee's conduct of his campaigns. He finds Lee seriously deficient in strategic vision and accuses him of losing a war that he could have won. Mackenzie's indictment echoes mine when he argues that Lee "preferred to use offensive strategy and tactics, areas in which he did not exhibit much expertise." Mackenzie also notes, "The South held to a misguided offensive strategy, while there is very persuasive evidence that a more defensive Confederate posture would have worn down the North's resolve to continue the war and led to a political settlement favorable to the South." Mackenzie writes, "throughout the war, Lee failed to see what was necessary for the Confederacy to win with logistics or the most suitable strategies and tactics. Lee spent the lives of his men too liberally, lost their loyalty and failed his country."[11]

Another detailed review of Lee's generalship appears in Steven Woodworth's *Davis and Lee at War*. The Battle of Malvern Hill, he writes, "was a horrible fiasco;...the demonstration of the overwhelming Union firepower...should have precluded the infantry ever going forward at all, but so muddled and sloppily written were the orders to the division and brigade commanders that they felt compelled to march the men out of the woods and up the open slope into the meat grinder of massed Federal artillery and musketry." At Antietam, says Woodworth: "the gritty Federals came within a hair's

the Confederates, it was a desperate struggle....Never again until Appomattox would Lee's army be this close to destruction."[12]

Woodworth bluntly asserts that Lee failed at Gettysburg. Stymied by his Federal opponents during the fight, Lee continually "pressed assaults far beyond the point at which reason would have demanded that he cut his losses and withdraw. Lee had always been combative, but this was extreme!...[His] actions were an unhappy caricature of the most unfortunate aspects of his tactics."[13] Yet despite these observations, and after having discussed the differences between Davis and Lee regarding the wisdom of a defensive or offensive strategy, Woodworth believes that the latter was not a foolish grand strategy.

Like MacKenzie, Woodworth also emphasizes that Lee lost the loyalty of his soldiers—an assertion supported by the fact that the troops of the Army of Northern Virginia, worn out by rigorous campaigning and benumbed by the horrors of war, began to desert in ever-larger numbers after Gettysburg. Woodworth claims that the problem of waning enthusiasm was endemic in the South and that the "morale of the whole Confederate people was beginning to crack. The realization began to creep through the hearts and minds of Southerners after July 1863 that they might lose this war."[14]

Woodworth also touches on my thesis that Lee's efforts to prolong the war were not heroic or worthy of glorification. He writes that "Lee had believed that defeat was only a matter of time since the beginning of the siege [of Petersburg], an immediate certainty after the reelection of Lincoln. He had fought on because he considered it his duty as a soldier, and for the same reason he probably did not fully communicate his misgivings to Davis."[15]

Michael Palmer's *Lee Moves North* refines my criticism of Lee's aggressiveness and his penchant for offensive strategy. Concentrating on the Maryland, Gettysburg, and Bristoe Station campaigns, Palmer notes that "all three were strategic offensives, and the only strategic offensives that Lee undertook as commander of the Army of the Northern Virginia." All were defeats for Lee. Palmer asserts that "the relationship between the strategic offensives and Lee's defeats, was, in fact, one of causation. Lee's approach to command, one that enabled him to achieve marked successes when his army fought on the strategic defensive, failed him miserably when he adopted the strategic offensive." Palmer then notes that "the differing strategic concepts

FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR

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offensive tactics, his dislike of the details of staff work, his decentralized approach to command and control, and his strategic parochialism" all combined to lead to failure.[16]

Palmer also makes a passing comment on Lee's capacity for self-delusion, which, I said, extended sometimes to his beguiling others. Palmer describes a letter written by General Lee to Davis on September 4, 1862, as "a remarkable and disingenuous document. Here we have the commander of one of the most important of the Confederate armies about to undertake a risky invasion of northern territory on its own initiative....Lee knew that it was physically impossible for Davis to

Potomac and into Maryland." Palmer claims: "The facts remain, in shaping national strategy on the march, Lee exceeded his responsibilities as army commander. Lee was neither timely nor forthright in his communications with Jefferson Davis." Such letters state that Lee's intent was "feeding his army," and "harassing the Federals," to give the army "a few days' rest" in western Maryland, to recruit among the Marylanders, to forestall a Federal move into Virginia—there is no mention of intention for a battle. However, as Lee later acknowledged, "he entered Maryland in early September 1862 fully prepared to fight." In 1868, Lee said in an interview at Washington College, "I intended then to attack McClellan."[17]

Palmer observes that Lee's decision to cross the Potomac into Maryland was probably the worst decision he ever made as a general. He was about to lead a major offensive operation into Federal territory—the military and political ramifications of which were enormous—without discussing the matter, or at least the timing, with President Davis. Despite the extraordinary nature of the undertaking, no logistical forethought had been given to the expedition; there was no plan of operations, except for whatever existed in Lee's and Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson's heads. Of the army's major commanders, only Jackson fully understood Lee's thoughts. "Lee's original plan," states Palmer, "[was] based on an assumption that weeks would pass before the Federals would make any substantive response." Union Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, however, moved his army quickly even before the famous "Lost Order" was found, and this "earlier than expected reaction had checked Lee's original plan of campaign long before September 13." After McClellan's army had battled its way through the gaps in South Mountain, says Palmer: "Lee found himself facing disaster. With his army divided and weakened by desertion, its strength unknown even to its commander, Lee ordered a reconcentration at Sharpsburg, from where he could escape across the Potomac to Virginia, and safety."[18]

Once Lee learned from Jackson of the impending capitulation of Harpers Ferry, his aggressive nature returned, notes Palmer, and "Lee reversed himself, there would be no retreat...heavily outnumbered, his force still divided, and with his back to the river [Lee] had decided to fight...because it was battle that Lee had sought when he first crossed the Potomac." While McClellan made numerous tactical blun-

tegic and operational errors...and who at Sharpsburg presented McClellan an opportunity to perhaps win the war in an afternoon."[19]

Palmer then questions what lessons Lee had learned from the Antietam failure:

> Would Lee henceforth eschew hastily planned, similarly half-cocked offensive operations? Would future offensive operations be approved ahead of time by the president, provided with appropriate available support—manpower and logistical—by the Confederate government and be well planned and staffed by Lee in cooperation with his principal subordinates? Would Lee continue to overestimate the fighting power of his own army, and underestimate that of the Army of the Potomac? In short, would Lee recognize the Maryland campaign for the fiasco and near-disaster that it was, and draw the proper conclusions from his experience? Unfortunately for the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee refused to consider the campaign a failure....In fact [he] longed for the opportunity to strike north again and to engage the enemy in battle. [Despite the condition of his] poorly clad, barefooted patriots, [he] refused to resign himself to defensive operations. When the opportunity to move north presented itself again, Lee was prepared to strike, and to strike quickly, in much the same fashion as he had in early September 1862.[20]

According to Palmer, the next opportunity to observe if Lee had changed his behavior after his failure at Antietam was the Gettysburg campaign. Lee's second invasion of the North was motivated in part by his desire to avoid the transfer of some of his army to the West, as Davis and Secretary of War James A. Seddon were considering. Palmer notes that correspondence from Lee to Richmond prior to the start of the campaign was similar in tone to Lee's letters to Davis at the start of the Maryland campaign, suggesting "that the principal aim of the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia was not secrecy but obfuscation." He says that Lee's June 23 letter "is an interesting, and in some ways puzzling, document." Why, he asks, "at this late date, was he still unwilling to inform Davis that the Army of Northern Virginia had crossed the Potomac...why refrain from even mentioning that the army had already passed the river?" Palmer then states, "As he had the previous summer when the army entered Maryland, Lee assumed that he would be able to roam about the northern countryside for quite some time before being challenged by the slow reacting, and laggardly moving Army of the Potomac." Palmer is also struck by a "remarkable dispatch" written by Lee on June 25, wherein "The commander of the

not write Davis again until after the battle of Gettysburg] and further lowered the president's expectations for a successful campaign."[21]

"The Gettysburg campaign," Palmer writes, "was, in its details, a campaign of improvisation, with Lee determining his future course of action from the saddle. Questions involving the timing of the crossing and strength of the forces sent over to the north bank of the Potomac were settled only as the campaign unfolded....He shared few, if any, of his thoughts with his staff, his principal subordinates—[lieutenant generals James] Longstreet, [Richard] Ewell and [A.P.] Hill—or even the president of the Confederacy."[22]

Palmer goes on to say:

> Pitfalls [were] inherent in [Lee's] fairly secretive, personally compartmentalized, and ad hoc approach to an offensive operation. If Lee possessed a clearly defined objective for the campaign, he never communicated that goal to anyone. [Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he communicated different objectives to different people, at different times.] Military historians consider a clearly defined objective one of the most universally accepted principles of war. But what was Lee's objective? Was it to seek out and defeat the Army of the Potomac? Was it to threaten Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington? Was it to gather supplies for the army? Was it to force the Federals to withdraw troops from the West? Was it some or all of the above?...Only once, during the Maryland campaign, had Lee undertaken an operation without a clearly defined and broadly understood objective. That campaign ended in near disaster at Sharpsburg. In the summer of 1863, a similar fate awaited the Army of Northern Virginia in Pennsylvania at a small town named Gettysburg.[23]

General Lee, Palmer asserts, deserves criticism for his failure to develop and communicate his campaign plan to his subordinates, and for his "very decentralized approach to command and control." It is Palmer's contention that a decentralized command structure needs "well-motivated and confident subordinates...[who] understand the primary goals of a campaign" and that "Lee's unwillingness to share his concept of the campaign with his principal subordinates undermined the very system that he depended upon to win the victory he sought....Lee's secretiveness and silence would become a critically important factor affecting the fighting power of the Army of Northern Virginia," affirms Palmer.[24]

Palmer also examines the celebrated cases of alleged failure among

for Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's seemingly errant conduct. He states: "Nine months [after Sharpsburg] Lee marched North again, expecting to operate in Pennsylvania throughout the summer before returning to Virginia in the fall. Sixteen days after Ewell's van crossed the river, the Army of Northern Virginia found itself engaged in an epic battle at Gettysburg. The fault was not Jeb Stuart's." The alleged failures of Ewell and Longstreet he attributes to "Lee's unwillingness...to take charge of the battle." Palmer sees Pickett's Charge as "a senseless, even suicidal assault...the last of a series of decisions stretching back to early April 1863."[25]

After his retreat into Virginia, Palmer writes that Lee "chose to ignore [the lessons] of the Gettysburg campaign. He downplayed, to an incredible degree, the significance of his failures, and not just in the official reports." In a July 12 missive to his wife, "Lee displayed his well developed talent for understatement, writing 'You will have learned...that our success at Gettysburg was not as great as reported. In fact, we failed to drive the enemy from his position & our army withdrew to the Potomac.'" Palmer notes that though the campaign had ended poorly for the South, the experience in no way allayed "Lee's desire to resume the offensive."[26]

Palmer's analysis of Lee's Bristoe Station strategic offensive is especially useful because this effort is not as well known as Antietam or Gettysburg. Nevertheless, many facets of Lee's planning and behavior during the Bristoe campaign repeated the characteristics he exhibited during his forays into Maryland and Pennsylvania. This campaign appears to have been another of Lee's efforts to protect his army from suffering further detachments after two divisions of Longstreet's First Corps were sent to the western theater of operations. Having learned that the Army of the Potomac's Eleventh and Twelfth Corps had been sent to the Army of the Cumberland, Lee apparently decided to go on the offensive. "From Lee's official correspondence," writes Palmer, "it is unclear whether he sought to keep [Maj. Gen. George G.] Meade busy to prevent further detachments being sent to the west, to drive Meade out of Virginia, or to bring on a battle." In the midst of the campaign, "Lee offered several reasons for his march north, although he never mentioned engaging Meade's army until after the battle of Bristoe Station on October 14."[27]

On October 13, Lee wrote Secretary Seddon that the army was on

Washington." Two days after Bristoe Station, he wrote to Seddon informing him that he had maneuvered "with the view of turning the right flank of the enemy and intercepting his line of retreat." In an October 17 letter to President Davis, completed as the Army of Northern Virginia retreated back to the Rappahannock River after its Bristoe failure, Lee wrote that he had moved north "with the view of bringing on an engagement with the army of General Meade." This was consistent with his prior strategic offensives.[28]

Palmer goes on to state that Lee's worn army was unprepared for a fall offensive: "Lee's health was poor....The units of the Army of Northern Virginia were understrength, undersupplied, and unpaid, and the horses were in poor shape." After the defeat, Lee wrote Seddon on October 19, claiming, "Nothing prevented my continuing in his front, but the destitute condition of the men, thousands of whom are barefooted, a greater number partially shod, and nearly all without blankets, or warm clothing." Palmer notes that these facts were also true before Lee began his move north and adds that the Confederate commander's "penchant for hastily planned, unannounced offensives" did not allow Southern Quartermaster General Alexander R. Lawton "any advanced warning that the Army of Northern Virginia was about to strike North."[29]

After summarizing Lee's defeat at Bristoe Station, Palmer concludes that: "Once again, one of the Army of Northern Virginia's offensives had miscarried; once again, one of Lee's corps commanders had failed...Lt. Gen. Ambrose Powell Hill [was] too quick to press the assault at Bristoe Station. Despite the fact that Lee's army held the field, he knew that he had failed and had to retreat." In an October 23 report, Lee noted that Hill's attack had been "repulsed with some loss, and five pieces of artillery, with a number of prisoners, captured." Despite Hill's culpability for the Bristoe setback, Palmer indicates that "[Lee] must bear some of the responsibility....Once again he had used his cavalry as rear guard and led the advance northward with his infantry....The cavalry failed...to scout ahead of Hill's advance.... Neither Powell Hill nor [Maj. Gen.] Harry Heth was responsible for the absence of cavalry on the road to Bristoe Station."[30]

Finally, Palmer states: "The Bristoe Station campaign demonstrates that despite the disaster at Gettysburg, Lee remained wedded to the offensive. He could easily have remained on the defensive and allowed

sive distributions were frequently faulty, seldom well organized and generally badly staffed....For Lee to attack an army twice the size of his in October was absurd. He marched north with nothing more than a hope that he might win some kind of meaningful, if only symbolic victory, but with the conviction that an offensive was the surest way to forestall further detachments from his own army."[31]

Thomas Buell's *Warrior Generals* is a review of the military history of the war. Referring, as does Emory Thomas, to Lee's Mexican War experience, Buell notes that during the Peninsula campaign in 1862 Lee had forgotten or dismissed a key aspect of that experience—reconnaissance. As an example of this oversight, Buell points out that Lee had not ordered topographical surveys or had maps made before the campaign's onset. Further, Lee's orders initiating the Peninsula assaults were marked by "ambiguity and omissions [that] would wreck Lee's plan even before the first gun had been fired."[32]

At Gaines' Mill on June 27, Buell asserts that "of five divisions at his disposal, Lee had gotten one in motion and had flung it against the whole of [Brig. Gen. Fitz-John] Porter's Corps." The Confederates lost eight thousand men while the Federal losses were half that number. "Lee...had but a slight understanding of conditions on Malvern Hill—trees in the valley limited his field of vision and he made no attempt to reconnoiter the terrain," points out Buell. The author also reaches the conclusion that Lee's "limited knowledge about artillery" led him to send "more and more regiments" in piecemeal attacks against Malvern Hill where, "like all that had gone before, they too were consumed" by the deadly Federal barrage. In Buell's opinion, "McClellan...survived [the Peninsula]...because of inept leadership within the Confederate high command, inferior staff, faulty tactics, and mediocre matériel." Even Confederate officers like Maj. Gen. Daniel Harvey Hill, writes Buell, complained about the "blundering management of the battle."[33]

After Second Manassas, according to Buell, "It was altogether a time to think clearly about the future in concert with other minds, to refit the Army of Northern Virginia, to restore interior lines of communication, and to conserve the most precious resource of the Confederacy: its emaciated, ill-clothed, bone-weary infantry soldiers." Instead, says Buell, "Compelled by the certainty of his views, Lee chose to preempt Richmond and move so swiftly that Davis would be overtaken by events and forced to go along."[34]

Buell adds:

> Lee's Maryland campaign was a calamity for the Confederacy that would forever cripple its war aims. Civil war battles are ultimately fought for political objectives. No good reason existed to warrant an invasion of Maryland at that time, and under those circumstances. Lee's soldiers certainly knew this, for they abandoned the army in wholesale numbers. His assumption that the people of Maryland would support him was correspondingly fallacious, but he clung to it even after the debacle. "I regret that the stay of the army in Maryland," he wrote duplicitously to the secretary of war on September 20 "was so short as to prevent our receiving the aid I had expected from that State."[35]

Buell writes further that "Antietam reduced the Army of Northern Virginia to a mob of vandals. Defeated and disheartened, its officers and men had lost confidence in Lee's leadership and judgment. Thousands of deserters and stragglers, in growing numbers, roamed at will, and officers no longer exercised military order and discipline." Regarding September 18, 1862, the day after the Battle of Antietam, Buell makes a pregnant observation: "The fact was that Lee did not want to fight if he could avoid it, a drastic departure from his principle of fighting for the sake of fighting." He makes a similar observation that on May 5 at Chancellorsville, Lee wanted "to renew his assault against Hooker as on the morning of the Sixth, but Hooker...withdrew across the river....Lee's army [was] fortunate. Lee had reverted to his practice of fighting for the sake of fighting, but there was little to fight with." In Buell's judgment, further Rebel attacks would have done little to endanger "Hooker's entrenched forces."[36]

Turning to Gettysburg, Buell notes that in the interest of security "Lee wrote neither a plan nor orders" before this "extraordinary gamble" of a campaign, and the author wonders, why Lee even "attempt[ed] an invasion?"

> The Army of Northern Virginia was shaky, at best, in its readiness to fight. Lee had completed reorganizing just four days earlier. He had no plan, no real objectives; other than to react fatalistically to developments as his scattered army meandered on country roads...they had no destination, no timetable. By marching slowly, wear and tear on man and beast was lessened, and time was given to forage.... Eventually, of course, he knew that he would have to fight, for the Federal Government would not allow him a free hand indefinitely....Lee intelligence system had collapsed. Stuart would misinterpret Lee's ambiguous orders...and [not] report on enemy whereabouts.[37]

Buell also compellingly addresses the issue of Lee in regard to the prolonging of the war. He starts by describing Lee's army at Petersburg:

> The Army of Northern Virginia crouched in agony behind its Petersburg ramparts. During the winter of 1864-65, the siege had degenerated into trench warfare of the most desolate kind. The Confederate soldiers lived in squalor and misery, neither fed nor clothed nor sheltered while Federal artillery and sharpshooters fired on anyone who moved. The army's leadership had collapsed. Generals contrived excuses to abandon their commands. Captains neglected their men. Lee with dismay read the December inspection report for Longstreet's corps, a doleful indictment of the apathy of its officers. Lee angrily scratched out a letter to Longstreet...but spilling ink on paper could not impede the disintegration. In the absence of leadership, the sick, starving, dispirited enlisted men had incentive neither to drill nor to fight. Thousands deserted.[38]

Despite such a situation, Lee wrote to his wife "that he would do his duty & fight to the last." "To what and to whom Lee's sense of duty applied is unclear," comments Buell, "but it was neither to his soldiers nor the people of Virginia. In his "fight to the last" he would prolong a devastating war for no purpose whatever." Buell also comments that in such circumstances Lee's March request to Union Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant for a military convention was preposterous.[39]

Gary Gallagher has also examined Lee. In *The Confederate War*, Gallagher promptly disposes of the issue of Lee's sentiments regarding the peculiar institution and refers to Lee's wartime letter to Hunter in which he discussed slavery. Gallagher is also deeply concerned with the issue of Lee's generalship and sets forth an extensive analysis of previous scholarship on this issue. Gallagher examines the idea that Lee's aggressive strategy and tactics, and the losses incurred as a result of pursuing such tactics, led directly to Confederate defeat. Gallagher also edited and contributed to *Lee The Soldier*. In his essay in that volume, Gallagher responds vigorously to those writers like myself who have criticized Lee and concludes his *Lee the Soldier* essay with the statement, "Without Lee and that famous field command, the Confederate experiment in rebellion almost certainly would have ended much sooner."[40]

In 1997, Edward Bonekemper wrote *How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War*. As the title suggests, he does not mince words. Lee was a failure

according to Bonekemper, from first to last. In western Virginia in 1861, Lee failed to take charge of his battles and issued complex and ineffective combat orders, characteristics that continued through the "slaughter on the Peninsula" to the end of the war. Overall, Bonekemper believes that Lee's generalship had a "lethal effect on the Army of Northern Virginia," and he points out that despite the devastating potential of modern weapons, Lee continuously relied on frontal attacks. Each battle, win or lose, was a failure, even Chancellorsville, where "the Confederates decimated themselves in a series of frontal attacks" on the Union's defensive perimeter to produce "a victory that wasn't."[41]

Bonekemper believes that Gettysburg was likely the nadir of Lee's efforts and finds Lee at fault for the actions of all the familiar scapegoats—Stuart, Ewell, and Longstreet. "Lee was either fighting the wrong war or fighting on the wrong side," is Bonekemper's scathing indictment of Lee's abilities. Bonekemper argues the Confederate defeat in the West is also Lee's responsibility because of his refusal to part with troops for this critical theater and his lack of exertion in preventing the incompetent Lt. Gen. John B. Hood's appointment to command of the Army of Tennessee. In the 1864 Overland campaign, Bonekemper believes that Lee played directly into Grant's hands by constantly attacking the Union army. Bonekemper concludes with this quote from military historian John Keegan: "The only cult general in the English-speaking world—Robert E. Lee—was the paladin of its only component community to suffer military catastrophe." Lee was responsible for that catastrophe. Bonekemper also quotes J.F.C. Fuller, "The more we inquire into the generalship of Lee, the more we discover that Lee, or rather the popular conception of him, is a myth."[42]

It is to be noted that Bonekemper is especially critical of Lee for continuing the war after the onset of the Petersburg siege. He writes, for example: "On December 31, 1864, less than half of the Confederate soldiers were present with their units. Therefore, 1865 should have witnessed no fighting. But Lee had yet to call a halt to the bloody proceedings. The thousands of deaths that year were a macabre tribute to his chivalry and sense of honor and duty."[43]

The thesis of Bevin Alexander's *Robert E. Lee's Civil War* is the general ineptitude of Lee, principally his relentless offensive strategy and tactics from the Peninsula to the war's very end, which destroyed his

ally summarizes my book's thesis: "The key to understanding Lee as a commander is that he sought from first to last to fight an offensive war—that is, a war of battle and marches against the armies of the North. This offensive war, though it produced many spectacular clashes and campaigns that arouse fascination to this day, ultimately failed because Lee's methods and strategies were insufficient to overcome the South's weakness in arms and manpower."[44]

Alexander posits that the South should have used its two major armies to prevent "Northern movements into the South" and permit "the Confederacy to pursue a long war preserving its other, more limited resources, especially its manpower. In time the North might have become weary of its inability to end the war and stop losses." Alexander believes Lee "never understood the revolution that the Minie bullet had brought to battle tactics" and concludes that the general's "tendency to move to direct confrontation, regardless of the prospect or the losses that would be sustained, guaranteed Lee's failure as an offensive commander."[45]

The point of the foregoing discussion is not that these books agree or disagree with my analysis and conclusions about the Lee tradition. The point is not whether I agree with all of these writers' conclusions. The point is that these scholars acknowledge questions about Lee akin to those that I raised; they inquire into them, research the data, and discuss the pros and cons of the issues. In short, they "consider" Lee. These works represent a sea of change in Lee scholarship since *Lee Considered* appeared. The Lee advocates, who for a hundred years have insisted that every knee must bend at his name, may continue in their beliefs, but the rest of us can now consider Lee the mortal. ℂ

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[1] Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[2] Ibid., 21; Letter, Robert E. Lee to Andrew Hunter, January 11, 1865, United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ser. 4, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), 1007–9.

[3] Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert. E. Lee and Civil War History*, 104; J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (London: 1929), 377.

[4] Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

[5] Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 173.

[6] Ibid., 173, 177, 183–4.

[7] Ibid., 141.